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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

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WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

Office of the Director

1374-1051

13 March 1974

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Henry A. Kissinger
Assistant to the President for
National Security Affairs

SUBJECT: North Vietnamese Attitudes Toward
Laos and Cambodia

In our conversation last Friday (8 March), you raised several questions about present North Vietnamese attitudes and intentions toward Laos and Cambodia. You may be interested in the attached brief memorandum, prepared within the Agency, which responds to these questions somewhat more comprehensively than I did in my oral comments to you.

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William E. Colby
Director

Attachment

EXECUTIVE SECRETARY FILE

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Hanoi's Current Attitude Toward Laos
and Cambodia

1. Hanoi's assumptions in Laos and Cambodia have a good many similarities. In both countries the North Vietnamese seem to believe that they already have most of what they need and that action to alter the basic situation is not called for. In Laos this means supporting the Vientiane agreement and withdrawing some troops, but not pressing very hard for the full implementation of the agreement. In Cambodia it means giving the Khmer Communists material aid but avoiding the kind of extensive support that would make their victory a foregone conclusion.

2. In Laos as a result of the ceasefire agreement, Hanoi has an unchallenged buffer zone next to North Vietnam, unchallenged use of the eastern Lao panhandle for logistics activity, the prospect of a neutral, non-hostile coalition government in Vientiane, and a sharply reduced US military commitment. Were the North Vietnamese to set the Vientiane agreement in jeopardy by new military action, either on their own or by proxy through the Pathet Lao, all these valuable gains would be in question. There thus seems little likelihood that they will do anything to upset the ceasefire in Laos. Nor are the Pathet Lao likely to kick the traces; Prince Souphanouvong probably hopes that establishment of a coalition government would provide the Pathet Lao a better life than continued fighting. With the danger of heavy fighting substantially reduced, Hanoi has felt able to withdraw some North Vietnamese troops from northern Laos back into North Vietnam and to move some forces from the panhandle into South Vietnam. The withdrawals in northern Laos may have been calculated to encourage concessions by Souvanna Phouma to Pathet Lao demands in the negotiations on a political coalition. On the other hand, Hanoi probably sees no reason to urge the Pathet Lao to move faster in the negotiations over

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the implementation of the Vientiane agreement than the achievement of Pathet Lao goals would dictate.

3. Hanoi's equities are less easy to sort out in Cambodia, but here too Hanoi seems to feel that a relatively conservative policy is appropriate. In part this belief is derived from the strongly held Vietnamese Communist doctrine that other ethnic groups (particularly ones which are not contiguous geographically to North Vietnam) such as the Khmer must basically win their revolution on their own, but the troubles Hanoi has had with the Khmer insurgents probably also play a part. For both practical and ideological reasons nothing approaching an open split between the Vietnamese and Khmer Communists is likely, but it is obvious that Marxism and revolutionary fervor have not overcome the centuries-old antagonism between the two ethnic groups and that the North Vietnamese doubt that the Khmer Communists could be counted on to fully honor North Vietnamese interests in certain situations.

4. The North Vietnamese would obviously be unhappy if the Khmer Communists lost out to the Lon Nol regime and Hanoi's own freedom of action in Cambodia along the South Vietnamese border were jeopardized. Hence the North Vietnamese have provided fairly substantial quantities of materiel this dry season to the Khmer Communists to at least enable them to keep the government's military forces on the defensive and Khmer Communist territorial control intact. But Hanoi would almost certainly have mixed feelings about a clear and total Khmer Communist victory that put these fractious and self-centered allies in power in Phnom Penh. They probably rest easiest, in fact, when Khmer Communist attention is focused on the struggle with Lon Nol and when their allies' dependence on Vietnamese Communist material support is most acutely felt. This serves to keep frictions between Khmer and Viet Cong operating in eastern Cambodia within reasonable bounds. Hanoi probably would not be displeased if the war in Cambodia simply went on for a while longer. This would parallel their strategy in Laos where they built up the Pathet Lao to a certain strength, but were careful to keep their allies' capability from becoming a threat to North Vietnamese interests. Hanoi

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may have estimated that the recent infusion of supplies to the Khmer Communists would be more than enough to keep them in the field but that manpower and organizational problems would keep them from victory. Such an estimate would square with our own view that the Khmer Communists simply have not yet shown the organizational capacity to raise and maintain and deploy forces large enough to bring about the government's defeat.

5. Certainly the last thing Hanoi wants at the moment is to tie up any part of the North Vietnamese Army in Cambodia in order to resolve the situation the way Hanoi would want it. Last fall the North Vietnamese even agreed to withdraw their personnel from southeastern Cambodia rather than continue the confrontation with the local Khmer.

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